

Lack of democracy in the running of the global trade union movement ITUC undermines worker rights

Before the turn of the 19th century, British trade unionists Sidney and Beatrice Webb saw the role of trade unions as an important vehicle for the democratisation of the economy and society.

For them, trade unions embody democracy since they are based on the principle of “government of the people by the people for the people”.

The universal understanding has been that unions are “a necessary element in the democratic state”.

Worker movements across the world have indeed played an important role in the social, political and economic transformation of societies. Many countries including South Africa would not have reached the heights they have in the economy, political or social society today without the tremendous contribution of global workers in opposing apartheid.

As a concept, industrial democracy would be underdeveloped in labour market governance. The foundations of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) from its humble beginnings just over a hundred years ago were founded on democratic principles that underpin social dialogue and, by extension collective bargaining.

Democracy is about tolerance.

Rutgers University’s Andrew Murphy defines tolerance as “the self-restraint of not restricting or reducing the rights or autonomy of others or other ways of being and acting”.

Democracy and tolerance have shaped the character that the ILO proudly embraces today. The ILO holds a distinction in the United Nations system as the only body where governments, workers and employers operate on an equal footing. The entire UN system is very much state-centric and rarely permits non-state actors to take the negotiation floor to vigorously debate issues with governments to frame global policy.

The conceptualisation of the ILO was to advance democracy in the workplace, where trade unions continue to play an important role. Without the centrality of the trade unions in the formulation and implementation of international labour standards, for example, the ILO’s effectiveness in promoting social justice would be a dull affair.

As a consultative platform, the ILO represents the early victories by workers that most people today take for granted. It is unfortunate that freedom and democracy still elude many people in many parts of the world, and many workers yearn for the day they can exercise their rights free of intimidation and repression.

Without democracy and social dialogue, the world economy could experience unprecedented disruptions and discontent. This is a point that seemingly escapes the international trade union movement. It continues to act confusingly under an incapable, pompous behemoth somewhere in the Pay Bas(?) who cannot see beyond her nose.

Global workers are unhappy and disillusioned with the current leadership at the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). If this is not managed, the workers could revolt against their comrades.

The Governing Body meeting that was held in March 2021 established rules for the election of the next director-general of the ILO who will take over from the incumbent and British national Guy Ryder. The elections for the new DG are scheduled to take place in March 2022. The significance of these polls emanates from the fact that the African continent is fielding a very competent and knowledgeable person, Professor Mthunzi Mdwaba.

As his campaign was running at full steam, attracting support from far and wide, it came as a surprise to learn that secretary-general Sharan Burrow of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) wrote a letter to the organisation's affiliates.

In it, she commands the trade unions and federations that "Should Mthunzi Mdwaba seek to meet with you please politely decline and indicate the ITUC General Council will take a final decision later in the year".

The ITUC secretary general Sharan Burrow has no appreciation of the principles that any trade union leader should uphold. Her style is undemocratic, oppressive, intolerant and borders on racism and harassment. Many workers would be flabbergasted to learn that their leader stoops very low to deal with those she dislikes, and others who are different from her.

Lady Madame Burrow outrageously singles out Professor Mdwaba for no reason when there are other candidates in the running for the ILO director-general position.

Mdwaba's election stands to re-shape the ILO's identity in its 102-year history. Except for Chilean Juan Somavia, the organisation has never been led by someone from the developing world, especially Africa and Asia. A woman has also never been at the helm of the oldest existing multilateral institution in the UN family.

Nonetheless, Mdwaba's candidature is significant for our time as he is an African who is the leader of employers, a workers' rights activist and a champion of social dialogue. Mdwaba rattles the comfort zones and debunks certain stereotypes which are inherent in multinational organisations such as the ILO.

The world has changed so much since the ILO was founded in 1919. African and Asian nations attained their independence to give a voice to millions of people who were previously oppressed and governed by superpowers against their will. The world embraces the human rights culture which strongly opposes sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination. Burrow's superiority complex and bias against Mdwaba that came at the expense of Australia's "Stolen Generations" is revealing her true colours.

Mdwaba's bid to lead the organisation promises to test the commitment of the social partnership in ensuring that the scores of international labour standards are for the first time put into practice. In 2019, the ILO celebrated its hundred years of existence with the adoption of the Centenary Declaration and Convention No. 190 concerning the elimination of violence and harassment at the workplace. The 2022 DG election promises to challenge everything that people know. Burrow is probably not used to seeing a person whose heritage is akin to people that she so much despises Down Under, who aspire to make an impactful change in the world.

The ILO's labour standards recognise that the world is fast-changing and that new thinking is required to lift out millions of vulnerable peoples from the clutches of exploitation, abuse and violence. The majority of the global workforce still earns slave wages and primarily resides in the developing world. Employees in the developing world lack basics like social protection, living wages and decent work environments like their contemporaries in developed countries.

The trade unions are supposed to lead from the front in assisting these workers to escape these harsh working conditions. The challenge, however, is that the global trade union movement appears to have drifted away from its commitment to democracy. It would come as a surprise to many to learn that Sharan Burrow is engineering the eradication of democracy within ITUC itself.

Burrow appears to believe that the most effective way to lead the organisation is through an iron fist, where democracy and alternative voices are suppressed. Her comrades have to endure intimidation and threats from her office located at Boulevard du Roi Albert II in Brussels. Some leaders are tired of kindergarten treatment by Burrow.

The leadership crisis in ITUC is not necessarily new, but it appears that most people chose to turn a blind eye. In 2018, for example, Rosa Pavanelli who is the secretary-general of the Public Service International (PSI) questioned the commitment of ITUC under Burrow to collective bargaining and social dialogue.

The Governing Body (GB) had decided to go along with the UN's resolve to cut pay for staff and the ILO's professional staff without consulting the workers. What was more shocking and outrageous is that the Workers' Group did not see anything wrong with this when it supported the decision that would have undermined not only the welfare of workers but the ethos that underpins the ILO as a champion of social justice.

The ITUC's role in this debacle indicated that the trade union doesn't subscribe to its expected duty of protecting workers. In defence of the GB decision, the ITUC reportedly said: "The GB couldn't prevent the application of the ICSC [International Civil Service Commission] cut, but called for reform of the methodology with the full involvement of the union representing the UN workforce and respect for the basic principles of social dialogue".

What is not known to most people and especially workers globally is that the Employers' Group, under the capable leadership of Professor Mdwaba, saved the UN workers from the corrosive character leading from the ITUC headquarters in Brussels.

Pavanelli lambasted the Workers' Group for its convoluted stance and confusion. She inferred that the gaffes by workers under their dictator queen created a great public relations opportunity for the Employers' Group "while undermining the Workers' Group role as the voice of workers within the ILO".

The reality, however, is that the Employers' Group did not act in the manner it did to gain cheap points and showboating. Professor Mdwaba and his team merely stood for what they believe in - social dialogue and democracy. This is exactly what Professor Mdwaba, as well articulated in his vision statement and hopes to bring to the ILO as it navigates uncharted waters.

The social dialogue will continue to be the most important pillar in efforts by the ILO constituents to deal with an uncertain future characterised by tech, pandemics, and demographic changes. Workers in different countries should treat the scaremongering tactics by Burrows that Professor Mdwaba is anti-workers with a pinch of salt.

Professor Mdwaba, as a person born under the clutches of apartheid in South Africa, fully understands the plight of the poor and suffering peoples of the world. Not only has he proven his strong commitment to defending worker rights on the governing body floor as the employer spokesman, but he has the right credentials to break the cabal that stands against the much-needed reforms in the ILO.

Burrow comes from a background of entitlement. She hopes that when her term ends at ITUC she will get a position at the ILO where she will continue her tyranny. Her poisonous character has reached unacceptable levels – she pulls strings from behind in every effort to frustrate the election of Professor Mdwaba as ILO director-general, and prevents the workers from exercising their choice.

It is time the global workers showed Burrow who is in charge by exercising their democratic right and chose a person who is committed to democracy, social justice and Decent Work to lead their beloved organisation, the International Labour Organisation.

Lastly, the African continent has two candidates and that weakens the continent going into this election. The African Union should have engaged with the trade unions and business when it decided to withdraw its support for Professor Mdwaba. It cannot be correct for the African Union to divide the continent, given that we have never had an African DG at the ILO. This is happening while the African Union talks about building a united continent towards 2063 as articulated in the AU Agenda 2063. The African Union needs to understand that ILO is a different institution from many other UN Agencies and they can't approach the issue of Professor Mthunzi in the manner they are doing. This will work against the unity of the continent.

Professor Mthunzi was nominated by both anglophone and francophone countries, Malawi, Lesotho, Kenya, Senegal, Cameroon. On the other hand, we have Gilbert Hougbo from Togo, which is also a French-speaking country, and Professor Mdwaba from an English-speaking country. Sadly, this perpetuates the anglophone-francophone divide. We cannot as the continent allow people to divide us along the lines of Francophone and Anglophone countries, decades after achieving our independence. The developed countries will continue to play a divide-and-rule role in the continent while they advance their agenda, and this will lead to Africa not progressing at the pace it should. As Africans, no one should dictate to us as we need to drive the African Agenda at all times.

Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains!

Tahir Maepa – General Secretary Public and Commercial Union of South Africa